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ABSTRACT

A study examined the difficulties Mainland Chinese students encountered in the process of adjusting to American culture. Subjects were 13 Mainland Chinese students enrolling in a mid-size public university, 8 females and 5 males. The length of time in America was from 13 months to 3 years, the average age was 27.9, and 6 were married. In-depth interviews were conducted and information was collected using a questionnaire containing 13 open-ended questions focusing on significant events during subjects' cultural adaptation. From the recurring themes of answers, results indicated that 3 dimensions of difficulties subjects encountered were: lack of language proficiency; a deficiency in cultural awareness; and academic achievements. Findings suggest that, for the latter, differences in Chinese teaching and learning styles, with which they were accustomed, and American ones produced difficulties. Also the lack of experience in handling the American University environment was a problem. Suggestions for future research include finding the relationship between these 3 dimensions and examining the strategies Mainland Chinese students use to cope with problems in intercultural adjustment. (Contains 29 references.) (Author/CR)

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Dimensions of Difficulties Mainland Chinese Students Encounter in the United States

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Abstract

This study was designed to investigate the difficulties Mainland Chinese students encountered in the process of adjusting to American culture. In-depth interviews were conducted in this study to collect information from 10 Mainland Chinese students. From the recurring themes of answers of each question three dimensions of difficulties Mainland Chinese students encountered in the United States were identified: language ability, cultural awareness, and academic achievements. Directions for future research and limitations of the study were discussed.

Dimensions of Difficulties Mainland Chinese Students Encounter in the United States

With hundreds of Chinese students go abroad to pursue their higher education every year, the study of how these students adjust to a new culture has become a popular topic. However, most studies on Chinese students overseas focus on those from Hong Kong and Taiwan. Since late 1970s more and more Chinese students from Mainland have begun to join the trend of studying abroad. Many of them came to the United States. This group of mainland Chinese students provides a new opportunity for intercultural communication scholars to study how they adjust to the American culture. This study attempts to investigate this topic by explaining the adjustment process of Mainland Chinese in the United Sates.

Furnham (1987) defines people who temporarily stay in foreign places for academic or business reasons as "sojourners." Sojourners experience "culture shock" when their cultural beliefs crash with the host culture. Due to not being able to understand and predict the norms of the host culture, sojourners tend to develop a unusual and unfamiliar pattern of behaviors. The lack of familiarity towards the host culture extends to both the physical and the social environments. In a broad sense, business people, diplomats, foreign workers, students, and voluntary workers are usually classified as sojourner groups. However, the group of foreign students shows a distinction from other sojourner groups. According to Thomas and Althen (1989),

> "Foreign students are sojourners in the host culture and are therefore are people in transition, most having come to accomplish an educational goal. They are in phase of their lives that will presumably end in the fairly near term, and most plan to return to their home countries." (P. 206)

The number of foreign students in the United States increases every year. Foreign students are highly motivated to do well and are prepared for their experience. Studies on cultural adjustment of foreign students have been an important perspective in intercultural communication. These studies provide knowledge about transitional experiences of this specific group of sojourners. Three aspects of cross-cultural adjustment are discussed here: (1) culture shock, (2) factors negatively affect cross-cultural communication, and (3) coping strategies employed by foreign students.

Culture shock is a form of "alienation" (Adler, 1975). It is a psychological disorientation aroused from a lack of knowledge, limited prior experience, personal rigidity (Redden, 1979). Culture shock is generally regarded as a negative aspect of cultural adjustment. David (1976) even regards it as a punishment process. Adler (1975), however, argues that culture shock could be an important aspect of cultural learning, self-development and personal growth. Oberg (1960) has a description about culture shock:

> "Culture shock is precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social

> intercourse… Now when an individual enters a strange culture, all or most of these familiar cues are removed. He or she is like a fish out of the water. No matter how broadminded or full of good will you may be, a series of props have been knocked from under you, followed by a feeling of frustration in much the same way." (P.177)

Culture shock is commonly perceived as a normal process of cultural adaptation. In order to assimilate to the host culture individuals need to go through the stage of culture shock. Based on the study of 200 Norwegian students studying in the United States, Lysgaard (1955) first proposes a three-phase "U" curve hypothesis of intercultural adjustment. During the first phase of adjustment, individuals are excited with the experience in the new culture in which more positive factors of host culture are perceived. The second phase is the "crisis" stage of adjustment. Individuals experience the impact of loneliness and other symptoms of muladjustment. Negative perception towards encounterings characterizes this phase. Whenever individuals become more involved in social life, they will feel more comfortable living in the host culture. This is the third phase of intercultural adjustment. Nevertheless, Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963) develop the W-curve hypothesis to extend the U-curve model. The authors argue that after sojourners come back to their home countries they may experience similar readjustment process.

Adler (1975) further develops a five-phase model of transitional experience: (1) contact stage - in which individuals are still attached to their home culture. The experience in the new culture tends to be excited; (2) disintegration stage - in which individuals begin to show confusion and disorientation in behaviors due to cultural differences. Feelings of isolation emerges;(3)reintegration - in which individuals strongly reject the new culture. Hostility and withdrawal are signs of this period;(4)autonomy stage - in which personal flexibility increases. Individuals begin to develop cultural sensitivity and show improvement in coping skills that make them more comfortable and secure in both cultures; and (5) independence stage - in which individuals show a remarkable change of attitudes, emotionality, and behaviors due to the understanding of cultural differences. They are able to create meanings for the transitional experience in this period. This model represents a more complete study of intercultural adjustment.

Yoshikawa (1988) regards the cross-cultural adaptation process as a creative process which includes five stages: contact, disintegration, reintegration, autonomy and double swing. The author argues that cross-cultural adaptation should be conceived as an outcome of individuals' transcendence of double perception of the world. Yoshikawa identifies five patterns of perception in double-swing stage: ethnocentric perception, sympathetic perception, empathic perception, mirror-reflect perception, and metacontextual perception. In the final stage of cross-cultural adaptation individuals have capabilities of openness, sensitivity, and responsiveness towards the environment.

Furnham and Bochner (1986) identify three aspects of

difficulties sojourners may encounter in the process of intercultural adjustment: negative life-events and illness, social support networks, and value difference. Negative life-events, such as the death of a closed family member, divorce, or losing job, can cause depression of sojourners. The more people perceive negative life-events as threatening, challenging, demanding, and frustrating, the more they will suffer from illness.

Social supports affect sojourners' psychological adaptation. Cobb (1976) indicates that social supports are information used to show people that they are cared for and are accepted as a member of the group. According to Lonner (1986), a social support network is sustained by its structure, content, and process.

Differences in cultural values often lead to misunderstanding among people. Abundant studies have been devoted to investigating the impact of cultural values on intercultural adjustment (Lonner, 1986; Triandis, Bassiliou, Vassiliou, & Shanmugam,1972, Zavalloni, 1980). Feather (1979) points out that immigrants have an already established, fairly inflexible set of values and attendant behavioral repertoires. The second generation of immigrants is more likely to adjust to values of the dominant culture. Feather also indicates that the change of cultural value is a dynamic process that serves as a mutual function to both host and sojourner's cultures. He further presents three aspects of the change of cultural values: the quality and quantity of differences between the host's and sojourner's cultures, the tolerance for variations of cultural value systems in the same culture, and individuals' cognitive complexity, ability and motivation to change their own cultural values.

Furnham and Bochner (1982) propose four potential problems foreign students may face in the host culture: (1) problems such as discrimination, language problems, accommodation difficulties, separation reactions, dietary restrictions, financial stress, misunderstanding, and loneliness; (2) the requirement of becoming emotionally independent, self-support, productive, and responsible; (3) academic stresses; and (4) serving as a prominent role of representative of their own culture. Babiker, Cox and Miller (1980) study students' cultural background and life events and conclude that cultural distance and its negative influences lead to symptoms of culture chock. Gudykust (1994) also explains how cultures differ from the perspective of individualism-collectivism and low- and high-context communication. He argues that people of individualistic cultures promote self-realization, while collectivistic cultures require individuals fit into the group. Hall's (1976) low- and high-context schemes focus on cultural difference in communication processes. The level of context influences all other aspects of communication. People in low-context cultures tend to communicate directly, while people in high-context cultures tend to communicate indirectly.

Gudykunst (1994)identifies several sources that lead to misunderstandings when we communicate with strangers. They include the inappropriate transmission of a message, the difference of communication rules, language barriers, lack of task competency in

a different social context, different group identity or intergroup expectations, and unfamiliar topic in interaction. These problems appear in the process intercultural interaction that interfere with the effectiveness of intercultural communication..

As to coping strategies used in the process of intercultural adjustment, research has focused on how foreign students cope with difficulties in the host culture. Many researches regard communication competence as an important perspective toward cultural adjustment. For example, Wiemman (1977) conceptualizes communicative competence as the ability of individuals to select suitable communicative behaviors so that they can fulfill interpersonal goals. The author proposes a model of competence that includes five components: empathy, affiliation/support, social relaxation, behavioral flexibility, and interaction management. Ruben(1976) identifies seven categories in evaluating effective intercultural communication: display of respect, interaction posture, orientation to knowledge, empathy, role behavior, interaction management, and tolerance for ambiguity. Hammer, Gudykunst, and Wiseman (1978) identify three factors for successful adjustment: ability to deal with psychological stress, ability to communicate effectively, and ability to establish interpersonal relationships. Finally, Spitzberg (1994) points out that the increase of our communication motivation, communication knowledge, and communication skills promotes the degree of communication competence. In other words, the more we are involved in communication context, the more we feel satisfactory when communicating with others.

In regard to communication activities in the host culture, Kim (1994)proposes two basic inseparable dimensions: personal communication and social communication. Personal communication refers to the mental process by which we tune ourselves in our socio-cultural environment, develop ways of observing, and understand and respond to the environment. In the intercultural adaptation process, communication competence refers to sojourners' capability to decode and encode information in accordance with communication rules of the host culture. Kim (1988) also identifies the concept of "host communication competence". She analyzes the concept from four dimensions: (1) knowledge of the host communication system, including verbal and nonverbal communication rules; (2) cognitive complexity in responding to the host environment; (3) effectively emotional and aesthetic co-orientation with the host culture; and (4) behavioral capability to perform various interactions in the host environment.

To the Chinese students cultural difference seems are the major difficulty in their adjusting to American culture. Chen (1994), for example, finds that there are three stages of adjustment for Chinese students in the United: (1) taking for granted and surprise - when Chinese students first enter the new environment, they use Chinese values to evaluate the new experience, and always feel surprised about the culture difference; (2) making sense - Chinese students begin to make sense about unfamiliar experiences,

and then (3) coming to understand American culture. Xi (1994) also observes that difference of collectivistic and individualistic orientations between the Chinese and Americans affect the adjusting process of Chinese students in the United States. Chen (1993) argues that Chinese culture is influenced by Confucianism in which harmony with environment and people are emphasized. Chen suggests appropriate self-disclosure as a coping strategy to deal with social difficulties in the United States.

From the literature we find that research on intercultural adjustment tends to take a general rather than a specific approach. Very few studies have directly focused on Mainland Chinese students in the process of intercultural adjustment. In order to improve this problem this study, therefore, aims to examine the dimensions of difficulties Mainland Chinese students encounter in the United States.

Method

Participants

Ten Mainland Chinese students enrolling in a mid-size public university were invited to participate in this study. Among them, eight are females and two are male. The length of time they stay in the United States is from ten months to 3 years. The average age of them is 27.9. Six of them are married.

Procedure

In-depth interviews were conducted in this study. A questionnaire containing 13 open-ended questions was used to collect information about participants and their adjustment process (see Appendix I). The questions focus on significant events during participants' cultural adaptation in the United States. All interviews were taped. English is the main language used in the interview. However, Mandarin was used whenever the situation requires. The interviews were conducted either in interviewer's or interviewee's place. The interview process lasts three months. The interviewing time ranges from 30 to 150 minutes. The average time for each interview is 76 minutes.

Data Analyses

In order to find out the dimensions of difficulties Mainland Chinese students encounter recurring themes from each question were organized and coded. Based on the recurring themes, the dimensions were then identified.

Results

From the answers provided by the 10 participants several recurring themes were identified under each question:
Question 1: The hardest thing to adjust in the United States.
Recurring themes:

1. Hard to make American friends due to cultural differences.
2. Have problem to understand the language.
3. Feel uncomfortable in classroom communication.

Question 2: The most frustrating thing.
Recurring themes:

1. Misunderstanding caused by poor language ability.
2. Misunderstanding caused by different cultural values towards friendship.
3. Unable to use the university facilities, especially computer.
4. Unable to follow classroom discussions.

Question 3: The most embarrassing moment.
Recurring themes:

1. People misunderstood what I said.
2. Get lost in classroom discussion.
3. Could not understand instructor's requirements for class assignment.
4. When was greeted in American way by an opposite sex friend.

Question 4: Major cultural clashes.
Recurring themes:

1. Different attitudes and values towards life.
2. Relationship between female and male in the United States.
3. Relationship between professors and students in the United States. Students don't show respect to their professors as expected.

Question 5: Does American friend fully understand you?
Recurring theme:

1. It is impossible to fully understand each other due to cultural differences.
2. Do not expect Americans to understand me.

Question 6: English proficiency.
Recurring theme:

1. Comprehension of English affects academic life, communication, and better understanding of American culture.

Question 7: Social interaction with Americans.
Recurring themes:

1. Have no closed American friends
2. Have no common topics with Americans.
3. Seldom involved in American community.

Question 8: Food.
Recurring theme:

1. Prefer to have Chinese food, but it is okay to deal with American food.

Question 9: Making American friends.
Recurring theme:

1. No closed American friends at all.

Question 10: Clothing.
Recurring themes:

1. No difference between China and America.
2. American style tends to informal in campus.

Question 11: Transportation.
Recurring themes:

1. No car is difficult to do daily affair.

2. Greyhound is convenient for long trip.
3. It is easy to be picked up by friends who have cars.

Question 12: Recreation.
Recurring themes:
1. Go to movie with friends.
2. Listen to the music.
3. Go to gym.

Question 13: Finance.
Recurring themes:
1. Only buy necessary things.
2. Seldom spend money.

Discussion

After carefully examining the recurring themes of the 13 questions three dimensions of difficulties Mainland Chinese students encountered in the process of intercultural adjustment can be identified: language ability, cultural awareness, and academic achievements. These dimensions are mainly embedded in questions 1-7 and 9. Other items, including food, clothing transportation, recreation, and finance apparently have no negative impact on their adjustment to the host culture.

The first dimension is language ability. Most Chinese students came to the United States with high scores in TOFEL and GRE tests. However, as soon as they arrived the United Stated, they immediately found that their English ability is not good enough for them to appropriately use the language in speaking and writing. The lack of language proficiency was perceived as the major obstacle in the process of intercultural adjustment by the Mainland Chinese students. The problem deters the understanding of communication with Americans academically and socially. It is the first problem the Mainland Chinese target to improve. One of the interviewees illustrated an example of language problem she experienced. She said that one night she went to a comedy talk show, the comedian unexpectedly picked her as a target of his joke. All other audiences laughed violently, but only she couldn't understand what was happening. Other interviewees also expressed that they were always lost in the classroom when the instructor and American students used slang or discussed non-course related issues.

The second problem is cultural awareness, especially to deal with cultural differences between China and America. Most participants indicated that differences derived from cultural values, attitudes, and beliefs severely affect their academic and daily life. Communication is often put to an end due to cultural differences. For example, how to deal with friendship is one of the most difficult things to adjust due to cultural differences. In China, the collectivistic life style in school and workplace provides people with an opportunity to develop an intimate interpersonal relationship. Frequent interactions with friends in China are common. In contrast, American people tend to be much more individualistic. Their emphasis on privacy often prevents them from establishing friendship. In this study all participants

mentioned that they had no intimate American friend. Six of them even mentioned that they have no any American friend. Their relationships with Americans are kept in a superficial level.

One interviewee explained her experience. She said that she took a class with an American student last semester in which they often exchanged ideas about the project they worked as a term. This semester they select a same class again. At the first day of the class she excitedly greets him, as people normally do in China among classmates, but to her surprise, the American classmate reluctantly responds to her greeting and seems feel offended. It is so embarrassed because, as she described, "It seems to others that I am a silly girl who falls in love with him and is ignored!" She continued, "In the United States, even though you have been a classmate with an American for ten years, the relationship between you and him/her probably would stay in the level of 'Hi', 'How are you' forever."

Another young girl also had a similar experience. She spent a holiday in one of her American classmate's home. Whenever she spoke with her classmate's brother, all their family members teased her that she fell in love with him, only because she had praised him "handsome." She said, "it is so funny, I never had any intention to become his girlfriend. Because he is my classmate's brother and I stay in their home, I naturally treat him friendly. But they misunderstood me."

Finally, a male student described one of his most unforgettable experiences. He had taken several classes with an American female professor who was very nice and had helped him greatly in class. During summer vacation, he saw the professor on campus and approached her to say "hello." Surprisingly, the professor acted like she didn't see him at all and walked away in hurry. He was hurt. He said, "maybe I am too Chinese. In China, it is an unalterable principle that a student admires and respects his/her teacher. Till now I do not know why she treated me like that. Strangely, after that, she is as nice as before to me again in class."

The third problem is academic achievements. Academic achievements are not only the major concern of the Mainland Chinese students, but also the main problem they have to tackle. Most of the participants in this study had finished their college education before they came to the United States. They have been accustomed to the Chinese teaching and learning styles. The open and individualistic oriented atmosphere in the American classroom brings them a great impact. Other aspects of academic life also produce difficulties for them to adjust. For example, the unfamiliarity of using university facilities often leads to the feeling of alienation and stresses.

As one of the interviewees stated, "the problem is not because we are incapable of doing things excellently, but because we are lacking the experience of handling the American university environment." In American university, a student uses computer to do homework is a basic technique that s/he needs not put too much attention. The other interviewee described her experience. In her first class the instructor asked students to do a two-page

paper by following the APA style. She has to check the meaning of "APA style" because she never heard that term in China. Another male participant also commented that American college education is not as tough as they are in China. He said that American education seems aims to equip students with the ability to "do" things, while Chinese education emphasizes teaching student to "know" things. He illustrated, "In China, I never interviewed others and never been interviewed. Whenever you have an idea, you simply write it down. In the United States, you are required not only to have an idea, but also to show how and where do you get the idea. You need to conduct, for example, an interview or experiments and to have reference to demonstrate you idea."

Conclusion

The findings of this study provide a further step towards the understanding of difficulties Mainland Chinese students encounter in the process of adjusting to American culture. The findings also suggest a direction for future research in this area. For example, future research can try to figure out the relationship among the three dimensions. More importantly, based on the three dimensions found in this study, future research may examine the strategies Mainland Chinese students use to cope with the problems they face in the process of intercultural adjustment.

Finally, a major limitation of this study is that the participants are all untraditional students (i.e., exchange scholars). The degree of generality of the results may suffer from this limitation. Future research should improve this problem

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Appendix I

This interview is designed to understand your experience in adjusting to American culture after you arrived in the United states. I greatly appreciate your willingness to participate in this project by answering the following questions:

1. How long have you been to the United States?__
2. Are you a : Undergraduate__ Graduate__ Others__
3. Can you tell me you education background in China? what was your major in China? what's your major here? why you select your current major?
4. Do you have any working experience in China?
5. Have you been to other foreign countries before you came to the United States?
6. Sex: Male__ Female__
7. Your age:__
8. Your marital status: Married__ Unmarried__ Divorced__
9. What's the hardest thing for you to adjust in the United States?
10. What is the most frustrating thing you ever experienced?
11. What is the most embarrassing moment you ever had?
12. What is the major cultural clash you experienced
13. Do you think your American friends (such like your advisor, classmates, and other friends) fully understand your problem in the United States? If no, why